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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 YEREVAN 000860

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

DEPT FOR EUR/CACEN

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PREL PGOV AM

SUBJECT: APRIL 9 DEMONSTRATIONS PEACEFUL, EVEN

BORING

REFS: A) YEREVAN 809 B) YEREVAN 844

¶11. (U) Sensitive But Unclassified. Please treat accordingly.

SUMMARY

¶12. (SBU) Roughly ten thousand opposition demonstrators rallied peacefully April 9 in Yerevan on Opera Square. In a meeting plagued by technical difficulties they called for Kocharian's resignation, and announced they will be "occupying" Opera Square until Kocharian leaves office. End Summary.

RETIREES, THE UNEMPLOYED, STUDENTS -- AND MALE

¶13. (SBU) About 90 percent of the roughly ten thousand opposition supporters who gathered in Opera Square on a warm and sunny Friday afternoon were male, mostly beyond retirement age (with a few students as well, including one twenty-something youth sporting a red Che Guevara sweatshirt with the slogan "Hasta La Vista, Baby"). The crowd started gathering about 3:30 for a scheduled 4:00 rally, and stayed largely quiet while the organizers labored to get their sound system working -- the speeches started about 5:00. As the crowd lackadaisically cheered an occasional comment from the podium, spit sunflower seeds and bought ice cream from enterprising vendors, a large security presence (both uniformed police and plainclothes) kept a close eye on proceedings and the crowd.

NOT ENOUGH UNITY TO NAME A SINGLE SPOKESMAN...

¶14. (SBU) While highlighting their recent decision to work together toward Kocharian's ouster and posing with arms linked and upraised, opposition leaders each took an extended turn at the microphone. With the Communists calling for a return to the Soviet era, when "everything was better," and other opposition leaders attacking everything from Minister of Defense Serzh Sargsian's gambling to the Yerevan Brandy Company privatization, the only thing they all agreed on was calling for Kocharian's resignation. Republic Party leader Aram Sargsian announced (to a somewhat skeptical crowd) that "negotiations are underway" and that President Kocharian might be resigning "even before this meeting is over."

CALLING FOR A SIT-IN

¶15. (SBU) People's Party of Armenia Chairman Stepan Demirchian announced that the opposition had decided not to march to the Presidential Palace because of the heavy security presence there and because the opposition didn't want to do anything that might give the government "the excuse to create a provocation." Instead of a march, rally organizers called for all "strong men" to stay in Opera Square until Kocharian resigns. After asking if there was "anyone in the crowd who can sing or tell stories" to come up to the microphone to entertain those staging the sit-in the majority of the opposition supporters were leaving the square. While we expect that perhaps as many as several hundred supporters may stay Friday night, we expect people will go home for Easter at the latest. Rally organizers announced an April 10 follow-on meeting at 6:00 to "discuss further steps."

RESTRAINT ON ALL SIDES

16. (SBU) Security forces around the rally were attentive, but even when following reporters through the crowd they stayed at least 10-15 feet away, and seemed to be under orders to avoid trouble. When, for example, an older gentleman was absently spinning an open pocketknife they moved closer, but as soon as they realized he posed no threat they moved away again without confronting him.

COMMENT: NO "BUZZ" IN THE CROWD

17. (SBU) Ten thousand people at a rally is more than we've seen since the demonstrations following last year's elections, but there was no real excitement in the crowd. The end of the rally was clearly anti-climactic, and organizers never built up the level of emotional support that they had in 2003. We will continue to watch the situation carefully, but for now see little prospect for radical change (ref A).
ORDWAY